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Around the Americas

House closes its doors for fight on CIA

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WASHINGTON — The House will meet today in an unusual secret session to debate a controversial bill that would end CIA aid to anti-Sandinista rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government.

House Speaker Thomas O'Neill (D., Mass.) has predicted a close vote, despite support from powerful congressional figures like himself and Majority Leader James Wright (D., Tex.).



O'Neill

The secret session is the third in four years, all dealing with Nicaragua. Today's coincides with the fourth anniversary of the Sandinista revolutionary triumph.

The first secret meeting was held in 1979 on a request by conservative Republicans to discuss information purportedly proving that the Sandinistas — then rebels fighting Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza — were receiving weapons from Cuba.

In 1980, conservatives again called a secret session in an unsuccessful bid to kill a \$75-million Carter Administration aid proposal for the Sandinista government.

Those secret meetings, however, were the first since 1830, when the House convened to hear a secret communication from President Andrew Jackson on a trade agreement with Great Britain. Secret meetings of the House had been more frequent until then.

Today's turnabout finds Democrats asking for a secret session as a means to persuade the House to halt

U.S. covert aid to the estimated 8,000 guerrillas fighting along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border.

The authors of the anti-covert aid bill — House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward Boland (D., Mass.) and Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Clement Zablocki (D., Wis.) — will brief their colleagues during the secret session. President Reagan and CIA Director William Casey oppose the bill.

The House also is expected to receive classified information on the status of the not-so-secret CIA program that began 21 months ago as an arms interdiction operation. Critics say that its goals gradually widened and that now the CIA may be seeking the military overthrow of the Sandinistas.

Liberal Democrats say they do not oppose arms interdiction but believe the CIA violates U.S. law in seeking to oust a foreign government.

The bill, while it would end aid to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, would create an \$80-million "overt" fund to help "friendly countries" in the region interdict Sandinista weapons shipments to El Salvador.

Reagan, Casey, Republican allies in Congress and some moderate Democrats, who fear that the President's policies in Central America will be undermined, have fashioned a complicated compromise.

The compromise forces, led in part by Florida Democrats Dante Fascell and Dan Mica, had attempted to modify the Boland-Zablocki bill. Now they are expected to bring up their compromise as an amendment.

The compromise would allow continued CIA funding for the rebels unless Nicaragua agrees to cease aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas.

The 2,000-word amendment contains many trigger mechanisms and caveats. Critics say it would allow the Reagan Administration to pursue the covert program indefinitely.

Under the plan, CIA funding for anti-Sandinista rebels could continue until Oct. 1, the beginning of the 1984 fiscal year. By then, Reagan would be required to submit to Congress a new plan to interdict arms moving from Nicaragua to El Salvador.

The Mica-Fascell plan also authorizes Reagan to open negotiations with Nicaragua — either directly or through other countries or international organizations — to reach an agreement that terminates Sandinista aid to the Salvadoran rebels.

Its crucial portion says the compromise will not take effect unless Nicaragua agrees to "cease all its activities involving the furnishing

of arms, personnel, training, command and control facilities, or logistical support for military or paramilitary operations in or against any country in Central America or the Caribbean."

Even if the Nicaraguan government agreed, covert action could still continue until the Sandinistas "reaffirmed the commitments made ... to the Organization of American States in July 1979." The stipulation refers to promises made by revolutionary leaders to call Nicaraguan elections "at the earliest possible date."

The compromise also states that covert activity need not end until the United States, the OAS and four key nations in the region — Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela — verify that Nicaragua is no longer aiding the Salvadoran rebels.